

By: MELISSA HAYES

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PHILADELPHIA - Burlington County Congressman John Adler still wants answers about how 92 prostate cancer surgeries were botched at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center.

Adler, D-3rd of Cherry Hill, joined Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, a Democrat from Philadelphia, at a congressional field hearing at the hospital Monday morning.

"This hearing is the first step in a necessary process to discover who is responsible for this outrageous lack of oversight and hold them accountable," Adler said. "This can't be allowed to happen again. Our American heroes deserve the best possible medical care."

According to a federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission report, over six years, 92 of 116 devices implanted to treat prostate cancer administered the wrong doses of radiation.

Adler, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, last week called for an investigation and sent a letter to Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, D-51st of San Diego, requesting hearings on the matter.

The hospital serves more than eight counties in New Jersey and Pennsylvania including military members from Burlington County.

The treatment problems stem from a procedure called brachytherapy, in which a device that emits radiation is implanted into the body. In this case, doctors were implanting large numbers of small "seeds" the size of rice.

Of the problematic procedures, 57 patients did not receive enough radiation and 35 received too much. In some cases, patients did not receive enough radiation to the prostate, but received too much to other parts of the body.

During Monday's hearing, the Rev. Ricardo Flippin, an Air Force veteran living in West Virginia, spoke of the treatment he received in 2005.

Flippin received less radiation to his prostate than prescribed, but also received radiation to other parts of his body, resulting in rectal bleeding and digestive problems.

Robb Graham, a Cinnaminson-based attorney who specializes in veteran medical malpractice cases, filed an administrative claim with the federal Department of Veterans Affairs on Flippin's behalf.

Adler and Specter questioned University of Pennsylvania Dr. Gary Kao, who performed many of

the procedures, as well as representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which monitors procedures involving radioactive material.

Kao testified that he worked in the best interest of his patients and was not the "rogue" doctor he was being portrayed.

Adler said many of the people questioned passed the blame, including Kao, who said he was not properly trained. He asked Kao to apologize to Flippin. Instead, Kao said he was "saddened" by what happened.

"To me it was an outrage that the doctor who performed these procedures with such a high failure rate did not take the blame at all," he said.

Adler said there are still many questions that need to be answered to ensure this does not happen again.

"We're going to have another hearing in Washington next week and try to get at the supervisory failures in the system," he said.